

LEVERAGING NATION BRAND EQUITY – POTENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Leveraging nation brand equity – Potential strategies for Trinidad and Tobago

In recent years there has been a spectacular rise in the prominence of nation branding. Almost every country in the world is now engaging in nation branding or is considering how to approach the challenge of developing an effective nation branding strategy. In some respects, there is little that is new about nation branding, given that nations have historically always branded themselves through national icons such as flags, military uniforms, currencies, anthems, and so on. However, what is new is the borrowing of branding techniques from the commercial sector and the application of these techniques to whole countries rather than merely to product or corporate brands. The key objectives that nation branding usually aspires to achieve include export promotion, the attraction of inward investment, tourism promotion, and an increase in international influence on the global stage.

To date, no country has succeeded in creating a convincingly comprehensive and coherent nation branding strategy that could serve as a template for others to follow. Examples of good practice do exist – New Zealand and Spain are probably the most frequently cited cases – yet there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate whether the success of such countries was due to their nation branding strategies or to other factors. Therefore every country, including Trinidad and Tobago, must develop its own original nation branding strategy based on its own unique attributes and circumstances.

In terms of its nation brand, Trinidad and Tobago starts from a stronger position than many other countries. Awareness levels are reasonably high. Independent external endorsements of the Trinidad and Tobago brand have been made by the IMF, Moody's Investor Services, and World Travel Awards. In Article IV of its March 2009 Mission to Trinidad and Tobago, the IMF states that "Trinidad and Tobago has achieved an impressive improvement in economic indicators and has established itself as the Caribbean's main industrial and financial center". As a nation brand positioning platform, the IMF's description of Trinidad and Tobago as 'the Caribbean's main industrial and financial center' sends out a powerful and positive message

to business audiences. Likewise, financial audiences will be reassured about the Trinidad and Tobago brand through the December 2008 assessment by Moody's Investor Services, according to which "Trinidad and Tobago's investment grade rating expresses Moody's positive view about the ability of Trinidad and Tobago to respond to a downturn in the commodity cycle without a significant increase in credit risk relative to its rating peers".

In the field of tourism, similarly significant recognition of the Trinidad and Tobago brand – specifically the Tobago brand – can be found in the island's World Travel Awards as Top Eco-destination (2003-6) and Best Caribbean Destination (2004). The credibility of any nation brand is greatly enhanced through such awards, although the onus is on recipient nations to ensure that the rest of the world is aware of the winning of these awards. Such awards and endorsements should feature prominently in the promotional material produced by Trinidad and Tobago's investment and tourism organizations.

Elements of the nation brand

A nation brand usually comprises four key elements: export promotion, investment attraction, tourism promotion, and public diplomacy. However, there is rarely an equal balance between the four key elements. In many cases, countries focus most of their nation branding efforts on tourism promotion and neglect the other elements of the nation brand. Indeed, an excessive focus on tourism promotion may actually damage the overall nation brand through creating a stereotype of the nation as a destination suitable only for rest and recreation rather than as a location for investment or as a nation that produces high quality export products and services.

Egypt is an example of a country that has recently made efforts to escape from its tourism-based, one-dimensional image as nothing more than a holiday destination. It has attempted to do this through the creation of the Egypt Business Image Unit. This unit is charged with branding Egypt as a business destination and to help the image of Egypt to develop beyond tourism in order to appeal to the global business community rather than just to the tourism market. Based on an in-depth SWOT analysis of Egypt's business image, the unit has developed a strategy to brand Egypt as an attractive business destination. The strategy includes the creation of a team to support the unit; creation of a visual identity through a logo; creation of digital media for communication and promotion; use of the internet as an interactive media channel maximizing the chances of outreach to overseas stakeholders;

arrangements of events abroad through working with public relations firms for extensive media coverage; arrangement of press tours to Egypt; and, upgrading of business-to-business communication to international standards.

Although a country's tourism brand should not normally be allowed to overshadow the other elements of the nation brand, it is obviously important for the domestic economy to ensure that the country's tourism brand is as attractive as possible. Branding techniques such as advertising and public relations are well established within the domain of tourism promotion, but less so within the fields of investment attraction and export promotion. In the areas of investment attraction and export promotion most countries are only now beginning to apply branding techniques. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, the export promotion element of the nation brand rests largely upon the foundation of the country's shipping and port development sectors. Globally, and not just within the Caribbean region, the importance of the shipping industry has been massively under-estimated in the context of nation branding. Nations such as Trinidad and Tobago, which have a well established shipping industry, should leverage that asset as a key component of their nation branding strategy. The Shipping Association of Trinidad and Tobago (SATT) should be welcomed by the government as a key stakeholder and participant in Trinidad and Tobago's nation branding strategy, and the quality of Trinidad and Tobago's shipping industry should be energetically communicated to relevant audiences.

In terms of investment attraction, the Trinidad and Tobago brand is already performing well and can boast the highest foreign direct investment per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the Investment Promotion Division, the implementation arm of the Ministry of Trade and Industry's Investment Directorate, benefits offered by Trinidad and Tobago to investors and exporters include ease of access to other countries within and outside the region through well-developed air and sea links, the potential for break-bulk business, and the significant financial and management capability available in Trinidad and Tobago. The Investment Promotion Division has promoted these benefits as a key element of Trinidad and Tobago's nation brand through activities such as participation in local and international tradeshows and conferences; coordination of outward Trade and Investment missions to Europe and the Far East; surveying existing investors to determine the level of their satisfaction in doing business in Trinidad and Tobago; and, development of the nation brand, 'We are Trinidad and Tobago. We Are Next.'

Steps in nation branding and innovative techniques

There is no pre-existing, off-the-shelf guide to the steps in nation branding that countries need to take when developing their nation branding strategy. Each country must formulate its own strategy, customized to its own unique essence and environment. However, as a generalization, two guidelines may prove helpful. First, any nation branding strategy should be based on collaboration between the public and private sectors. On their own, neither the public sector nor the private sector can produce an effective nation branding strategy. The reason for this is that the public sector tends to lack the branding skills that the private sector can provide, whilst the private sector does not possess the legitimacy to represent the nation as a whole, which is what nation branding campaigns purport to aspire to. Second, it is important to foster coordination and collaboration between the different organizations and individuals involved in the nation branding strategy. This represents a major challenge within the field of nation branding. How do you get a country's tourism office, investment agency, trade council, and diplomats to work together without creating another layer of demotivating bureaucracy and administration?

One country that is devoting considerable resources and efforts in this respect is Korea, through the establishment of a Presidential Council on Nation Branding, which was launched in January 2009 with the mission to enhance Korea's international standing and prestige. The Presidential Council has 47 members, including CEOs of major Korean corporations such as Samsung and Hyundai; the Ministers of Communications, Commerce, Culture, Education, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Maritime Affairs, Public Administration, and Transportation; the Mayor of Seoul; and the Presidents of public corporations charged with promoting investment, trade, and tourism. The Council has consulted extensively with policymakers and experts and has adopted a five-point program as follows: 1. Strengthening Korea's role in solving global issues. 2. Fostering tolerance for multiculturalism. 3. Raising the level of global citizenship. 4. Showcasing business and technology. 5. Promoting culture and tourism. It will be interesting to see over the next few years whether the Korean model of nation branding becomes established as an exemplar for other nations to learn from.

Innovative techniques in nation branding revolve largely around the use of new media to communicate cost-effectively with a global audience. Much of the most innovative activity in this regard has emanated from the Scandinavian nations of Europe, where countries such as

Estonia and Sweden have led the way in exploring the potential of online nation branding. Sweden, for example, has opened an embassy in the virtual world of Second Life. Other nations have explored the potential of online media such as YouTube. In future, one can expect nations to follow corporate brands in their use of the full range of brand-building tools in the digital environment, including Facebook, Twitter, and blogs.

Potential strategies for Trinidad and Tobago to leverage its nation brand equity

There are several potential strategies for Trinidad and Tobago to leverage its nation brand equity. I will briefly highlight just five of these.

1. Intensify efforts to position Trinidad and Tobago as the financial hub of the Caribbean and as a business gateway to the Caribbean and Latin America.
2. Establish greater coordination between representative organizations of the four key elements of the nation brand, i.e., tourism, export promotion, investment attraction, and public diplomacy. Embassies abroad are the natural focal point for such coordination of nation branding activities. However, the energy with which Embassies participate in their country's nation branding efforts varies widely dependent upon the personality of individual Ambassadors. Therefore it would be desirable to provide Ambassadors with at least a minimum level of training in the practice of nation branding.
3. Diaspora mobilization. Many countries have been slow to capitalize on the willingness of their diaspora to help in their nation branding strategy. As is pointed out in the 2009-10 Trinidad and Tobago Business Guide, "Trinidad and Tobago's large global diaspora, much of it centered in the major metropolitan capitals, provides a ready-made network and an interesting investment proposition". In order to mobilize its diaspora, the home country needs to develop a structure and process to ensure that any diaspora members who wish to help in the country's nation branding can do so.
4. Devote more resources to the promotion of Trinidad and Tobago's culture. A nation's culture is the truest expression of the nation brand. Culture is authentic, unique, and emotionally powerful. The important role of culture has been acknowledged in the Trinidad and Tobago Government's 'Vision 2020' roadmap, which prioritises a number of non-energy sectors for investment, amongst which feature cultural sectors such as film, food and beverages, and music and entertainment.
5. Consideration of the benefits and drawbacks of the Caribbean 'region brand'. Some nations find it useful to exploit the region brand to which they belong. Other nations may downplay

their region brand. Trinidad and Tobago can reflect on whether the Caribbean region brand adds any value to the country's own nation brand. Intuitively, the Caribbean region brand appears to offer value in the context of tourism promotion; however, the Caribbean region brand probably adds no value in the context of investment promotion. But these assumptions should be tested by appropriate research, upon which Trinidad and Tobago can then make decisions regarding its future nation branding strategies.